Modeling Arabic-Language Impression Change

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The Arabic speaking world offers a unique opportunity for affect control theorists to analyzing impression change dynamics within markedly different cultures using the same formal language. In this talk, we report on the findings of two major new impression change studies – conducted in Morocco and Egypt. We compare these findings across the two Arabic speaking cultures and to new impression change models from the Unites States. We find both important similarities and meaningful differences between U.S. English and Egyptian Arabic impression change in the context of social events. Impressions of actor evaluation after a social event are highly similar across the cultural models. However, there is a pattern of lower "stability" coefficients in the Egyptian impression change models (i.e., the ability to predict the affective impression of a person or behavior within the context of a social event from the general affective sentiment associated with that type of person or action in general, with no event context). This striking pattern may indicate that Arabic-speakers are more sensitive to the context of social interaction than U.S. English-speakers. Our models suggest a greater fluidity in Arabic culture, of both their own identities and the identities of others, as social actors move through social settings.

A second general focus of differences between the Arabic and US impression change models is around impressions of the objects of social actions. Many of the differences between Egyptians and U.S. respondents were concentrated in models predicting impressions of the objects of social events. The substantial differences in impression change with regard to the object-person, combined with the lower stability coefficients in all three of the object-person models, leads us to conclude that Arabic speakers might see themselves and others quite differently when they are acted upon in social situations, when compared with U.S. English speakers. The fact that emotions are also predicted by movement in this affective space (under the affect control theory model) implies that the emotional experiences and displays of Arabic speakers when they are acted on in social situations may be less like their "characteristic emotions" that come from maintaining the sentiment meanings of their fundamental identities, and more influenced by the situation that they find themselves in—particularly the evaluative character of the actor and the affective meanings of the behavior on all three dimensions (evaluation, potency and activity) and the consistency of the behavior with the evaluation of their own identity. We conclude by presenting a series of affect control theory simulations of cross-cultural interactions that illustrate the interactional consequences of the differences in affective processing of events as well as the sentiments associated with specific social concepts.